

Shopper nearly sinks, as 1909 cent surfaces

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Tribune readers.

Q — I nearly fainted in the grocery store last week when the clerk handed me a 1909-VDB Lincoln penny in change. The coin looked almost brand new. How did it survive circulation for so many years? — P.L., Chicago

A — Most likely, the Lincoln cent was part of a collection until very recently. Thieves often spend rare coins as an easy way to unload the take. It's possible, too, that a collector (or family member) accidentally gave the penny away.

At any rate, your discovery sells for about \$5, assuming it's in "almost uncirculated condition." If it has an S mint mark under the date, it would be worth about \$500.

Q — Years ago, my dad saved about 100 Indian-head pennies when such coins could still be found in circulation. Do they have much value today? — A.O. Summit

A — It depends on the dates and condition of the coins. Many Indian-head cents sell for less than \$1 in "good condition," including most of them made between 1890 and 1909. Some others fetch \$5 or more, and the exceedingly rare 1877 sells for \$300 and up.

In your self-addressed stamped envelope, I'll send you a retail price list to use in evaluating your hoard.

Q — For several years we've owned a \$500 bill showing President William McKinley (it's series 1934). The tellers at my bank say the government no longer makes them. Is this true, and if so, should we keep our bill? — T.W., Chicago

A — In 1969 the Treasury Department stopped printing bills in denominations above \$100. As you might imagine, large denomination bills are rarely collected because few people can afford them.

You'd probably have trouble selling the bill for much more than \$500 and would be better off putting the money in a savings account.

Q — Years ago, a dentist put two gold caps on my teeth. Do you have any idea how pure the gold might be, compared with a \$20 U.S. gold piece? — S.A., Oak Park

A — Most dental gold is 75 per cent pure (about 18 karat), according to a Chicago doctor. U.S. gold coins made before 1933 are 90 per cent pure.